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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000872

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/16/2023  
TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL BL  
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA'S TINY MUSLIM COMMUNITY

REF: A. 2007 LA PAZ 2500  
1B. 2007 LA PAZ 2626

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (C) Bolivia has a small Muslim community. Estimates range from between 300 to 1000, out of a total population of 9 million. Most in the established Muslims community were born in Bolivia and converted, or are the descendants of Palestinian or Lebanese immigrants that have long-lived in Bolivia. The community typically adheres to Bolivian styles of dress and conduct. The recent arrival of Pakistanis and Iranians that follow more fundamentalist Islamic traditions has apparently caused some friction with the established Bolivian Muslim community. The Iranians appear mostly affiliated with Tehran's new diplomatic mission to Bolivia. The two countries formally announced diplomatic relations September 11, 2007. According to an Embassy contact, four young members of the established Muslim community have gone to Teheran for "language and other training." The four appear to have been lured by money and perhaps other enticements. End Summary.

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The Established Bolivian Muslim Community  
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12. (C) Poloff met with Gerardo Cutipa the President of La Paz' Bolivian Islamic Community (Asociacion de la Comunidad Islamica de Bolivia) on April 14 as part of post's research for the International Religious Freedom Report (IRF). (Note: Mr. Cutipa also goes by the Muslim name Ahmmad Ali. End Note). Mr. Cutipa, educated as an engineer, is Bolivian by birth and converted to Islam as an adult. He claims that in his younger years he was an atheist with strong leftist tendencies. According to Cutipa, he even assumed leadership roles in leftist student unions. After working in Spain where he met a few Muslims, he converted to Islam in Bolivia

approximately 10 years ago.

¶13. (C) Mr. Cutipa states he informally represents a community of approximately 300 Muslims. However, according to a January 14, 2007 article in La Paz daily newspaper La Razon there are closer to 1000 adherents of Islam in Bolivia.

Mr. Cutipa states his community consists of 70 Sunni Muslims in La Paz, almost all of which are Bolivian by birth. Mr. Cutipa states that there are approximately 200 Sunni Muslims in Santa Cruz of mixed origin, some native Bolivians others are immigrants mostly from Palestine and Lebanon. There are smaller communities in Sucre and Cochabamba, approximately 10 to 20 Muslims in each city.

¶14. (C) Mr. Cutipa states he frequently participates in interfaith dialogues and tries to follow the "Koran's true teachings" that a Muslim must adapt to his/her local context, meaning he and his followers do not dress and behave much differently than other Bolivians. He mentioned that he urges women not/not to wear head scarves in public to avoid drawing attention and ridicule. The Mountain of Light mosque (Masjidim Jbelannur) that serves Cutipa's Muslim community is located in his home in the Miraflores district of La Paz. He states that only a small sign identifies his home as a mosque and that he does not proselytize, nor does he encourage anyone in his community to proselytize. Cutipa states that in the past he and members of his community suffered from occasional attacks largely from people "ignorant of Islam." He states that due to his outreach to members of the Catholic Church and to Bolivians in general, he and his followers are largely accepted and no longer experience much harassment.

¶15. (SBU) According to its website [www.centroislamicoboliviano.org](http://www.centroislamicoboliviano.org) the Bolivian Islamic Center (CIB) of Santa Cruz was formed in 1986 by Palestinian immigrant Mahmud Amer Abusharar. The Bolivian government, via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Office for Religion (Direccion de Culto) officially recognized CIB in 1989. Mr. Amer states that CIB has some 500 worshippers. The CIB and Cutipa's community are loosely affiliated. Unlike Cutipa, the CIB enjoys a fully operational mosque; however like Cutipa the CIB does not appear to encourage its adherents to follow fundamentalist codes of conduct and dress. (Note: Poloff will try to meet with Santa Cruz' CIB in the coming months in support of the IRF. End Note).

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Enter the Pakistanis and Iranians  
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¶16. (C) Mr. Cutipa stated that there is a small recent immigrant community in La Paz of Pakistani origin. According to Cutipa, the Pakistanis began coming to Bolivia approximately five years ago. Cutipa states the Pakistanis have a more fundamentalist view of Islam which has caused some friction with Cutipa's group. The Pakistanis community known as the Islamic Association of Bolivia has a more traditional mosque (Masyid As Salam) in La Paz' Sopocachi district. A January 2007 La Razon article estimated that roughly 70 worshippers attended Masyid As Salam mosque. Despite Cutipa's statements, the Masyid As Salam mosque has not only Pakistani followers, but also some Bolivian born Muslim converts. Mr. Cutipa states that funds for the construction for Masyid As Salam mosque came from overseas donations, but he did not specify from where. The Imam of Masyid As Salam was Mahmud Ali Teheran, a Peruvian-born son of Iranian immigrants. Ali Teheran departed Bolivia in March. Masyid As Salam has not yet named a new Imam.

¶17. (C) Cutipa states that recently, even prior to the opening of relations with Iran on September 11, 2007, Bolivia has witnessed a small influx of Shia Muslims. The Shia, according to Cutipa, are almost all directly connected to the recently opened Iranian Embassy. Cutipa explained that his community does not care much for the Shia because in Cutipa's words the Shia's "do not properly follow the Koran" and they "worship false idols." While there has been little mixing with the Shia, Cutipa noted that the Iranians did persuade

four young men from his group to go to Iran for "language and other training." Cutipa explained that money was one of the factors that lured the four to go to Teheran.

¶18. (C) The Shia, with support from the Iranian government, opened up a community center called the Bolivian Islamic Cultural Foundation in August 2007. The Foundation's President is Roberto Chambi Calle (who also goes by the name Yusef). According to a February 24, 2008 La Razon article Chambi's Shia organization has some twenty followers, many of which are Bolivian-born converts to Shia Islam.

(Comment: Given Teheran's connection to Bolivia's Shias we will continue to follow this community closely. End Comment).

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